

# Implementation of Florida's new Pre-K Provision

submitted by:

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## **I. The basis for what we do**

Beginning in 2005 Florida parents of 4-year-old children will know that taxpayer funds will be available to facilitate their children's education. The intent of the program is that all of Florida's 4-year-olds will learn those things that will prepare them to be successful students from then on – whether in public, private or home schools.

There is a beguiling specificity to this goal. We are concerned only with 4- year-olds. We are concerned only that they learn what will prepare them for school. But this simply stated goal disguises a world of uncertainty. The fact is that there is no settled agreement on what is important for those young children to learn or how best they should learn it.

On the one hand, we know that children who receive limited exposure to the world we live in, and the language we use to describe it, are at a disadvantage when they begin formal schooling. On the other, we know of children who were deprived of almost all such exposure by their parents, but who quickly compensated for that deprivation when enrolled at a caring school. They “succeeded in school” as well as children whose prior experience was rich.

We know that some children have been wonderfully prepared for school by attending pre-schools. We also know that the content and methodology at those schools can be dramatically different. At one the guiding idea will be that adults should not choose what the children will learn. Rather, the children should simply be helped to pursue their own discoveries. At another, judgments have been made about what is most important for children to learn, and they are led through that content regardless of any native curiosity. At one school, desks and worksheets are taboo. At another they are standard fare.

Still other children have been prepared just as well for school by no pre-school at all. They have been prepared through their experiences at home. And those experiences are known to be infinitely diverse. For many children they will have been provided by parents whose own education was limited, and who have no knowledge of the research that guides the educational practices of the experts. It is clear that both the professionals and the amateurs can prepare children well for school.

Finally, we know that there is substantial disagreement on what young children should be learning. Once one gets beyond the core material of reading, writing and arithmetic, reasonable

people disagree over what should be taught in history, literature, art, morality, or religion. Indeed they disagree about whether such things should be taught at all. Many believe that children of this age should be learning only what can be learned through play. But John Stuart Mill's father had him studying Latin and Greek before he was 5, and Mill went on to be one of the greatest thinkers of all time. Who is to say that a four year old should be learning colors and shapes and not Latin and Greek?

It is that last question that is the most important. **Who** is to decide what and where these 4-year-olds will learn? The point of this preamble is not that we are at a total loss on how to proceed with the mission of preparing children well for the later years of formal instruction. The point is almost the opposite. We know that there are many ways. Because of that, **some** adults will be responsible for deciding which path the child will follow. And thus the central question becomes **"Who will decide?"**

Given that a paternalistic decision must be made for each of these minor children, who should make it? The answer to that, backed up by centuries of reason, law and morality, is that the decision belongs to the child's parents in all but those rare cases where it can be shown that the parents are so negligent or abusive that the community must step in to protect the child's interest.

Very strong arguments exist to support this view. The only challenge that I will take up here is the central and tempting one that goes like this: Given that there are other adults who individually or collectively will, as a matter of obvious fact, know a great deal more about child development than almost any parent, why should not the decision on where the 4-year olds will learn be left to them? We should have a committee of experts rather than uninformed parents making these important decisions. Perhaps there could be local boards made up of teachers and experts in the fields of learning, language acquisition, brain development, etc.?

The difficulty with this idea lies in its consequences. If this line of thought were to prevail, why should most parents be allowed choose what their families even have for meals – given that they may be ignorant or dismissive of what is known by experts in nutrition? Why should they be allowed to care for their children when they are ill? Why for that matter should any parents be allowed to care for their children at all if it is known that the child could be under better care or in a better setting? Why not, for that matter, just pack most children up at birth and send them off to a nursery staffed by the best and the brightest that child development has on offer?

Such perfectionism and collectivism has persuaded different societies at different times, but it has never been welcomed in America. We prefer the mistakes and successes, the differences and the similarities, the triumphs and the defeats that arise from individual freedom to the dangers of giving up that liberty. We will intensely defend the right of parents to raise their children in the way that they, not somebody else, judge best. We also know that it works. Most children do very well when their upbringing is under the direction of their parents - and not committees.

The lesson in connection with the implementation of Florida's new commitment to subsidizing the education of 4-year-olds is this: Any proposal that delays, curtails, or places an intervening group of adults between the families and the funds is on the wrong side of history. It will invite a fight with the parents that they will not lose – whether in the legislature or the courts.

The funds must be placed in the hands of the parents and nobody else. We must waste no time looking elsewhere. We can then focus on our rightful task, which is to assist the parents in using them wisely and well.

## **II. Proposed Implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten – Overview**

This proposal proceeds from the belief that parents are the primary teachers of their children and that they generally make wise decisions for them. It wants them to have the means and the information necessary to choose among good ("high-quality") providers of early childhood instruction *outside their homes*, if that is what they wish. And it wants the parents to have the means and the information to make good educational provision for their children *inside their homes* – if that is what they wish. It wants parents to be protected from those who would defraud or take advantage of them as they make these most consequential choices for their 4-year-olds.

On this view the way in which Florida will ensure that all 4-year-olds enter school ready to learn is by providing the parents with scholarships for their child's instruction, with choices among quality providers, with the information needed to choose well, with measures to monitor their child's progress in learning, and with protections against those who would frustrate the parents in their important role. On this view the best way to make sure that no child is left behind is to put all parents in the position to make sure that their own child isn't.

The rest of this paper outlines how the State might accomplish this.

## **III. Proposed Implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten – Details**

### **A. Characteristics of the Pre-K Scholarships**

**Name:** Bright Beginnings Scholarships – to connect these scholarships with their collegiate precursor that already has widespread name recognition and popularity.

**Eligibility:** Child must turn 4- years old on or after September 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Amount:** To be determined. Could be fixed or variable.

1. Consideration should be given to whether the scholarship amount is the same for all children, regardless of the wealth of the family, as is the case for all funding in the compulsory grades K-12; or whether the amount should be means tested, as is the case for most scholarships in the independent sector and in the post-secondary years.

2. Consideration should be given to how the funds could be awarded to those electing to educate their child in their own home. Perhaps this could be done "in kind" through the provision of materials rather than funds.

**Source:** The State, not the counties, school districts or other local or regional sources. This should be one-stop shopping and the same for all families, as is already the case with all of Florida's collegiate scholarships and its two tax-funded K-12 scholarships, the Opportunity Scholarships and the McKay. All parents in all corners of the state should have just one place to

go in order to obtain their child's scholarship.

**Issuing Office:** To be decided. The expertise of the office should be in issuing scholarships as distinct from early childhood education. Its function is to provide scholarships, not instruction.

**Payment:** Quarterly. This is the familiar payment period for Florida's two tax-funded K-12 scholarships, the Opportunity Scholarships and the McKay. It works for the families and the schools. Periodic, as distinct from annual, payments foster quality because schools know that the parents may choose another provider at any time and that all funds beyond the current payment will go to the new provider.

**Where redeemable:** At any eligible instructional setting – a construct to be defined. It would certainly include public, private, and faith-based pre-schools, homes where children in addition to or other than that of the immediate family are under care, and a child's own home. The different settings that families might ordinarily favor should be defined and included. All would need to meet additional criteria to be eligible for redeeming scholarships. In a word, they would need to be accredited. The accreditation requirements should be substantive, setting minimum standards of quality but not prescribing a singular curriculum or methodology.

## **B. Measures to Foster Quality**

The primary role of the State (by which I mean the government – leaving open whether it is state, local or a combination) is to (a) fund the scholarships and (b) assist the parents in using them effectively by **fostering quality among the providers**. Specific ideas on funding the scholarships were given above. Specific ideas on fostering quality are given below.

The State also has two other roles:

- In the rare cases of parents whose negligence or incompetence is sufficient for the state to have assumed the childrearing role from them, the State or its delegates would assume the parental responsibilities of choosing the educational setting for the 4-year olds and monitoring their progress.
- The State already is one of the providers of instruction for 4-year olds. The government already operates some pre-schools. There is no reason in principle why it should not continue to do so.

The following proposals all foster quality while preserving the autonomy of the parents and the freedom for the providers to pursue their own visions of what high quality early childhood education should consist in. The government plays a critical part in establishing those conditions. Government creates the framework that gives the parents the opportunity to choose from among providers who are likely to educate their children well. This is achieved through a mix of quality control and consumer protection measures.

### **1. Fostering Quality: Requirements for Scholarship Recipients**

Children with Bright Beginnings Scholarships must:

- remain in attendance throughout the school year, unless excused for illness or good cause.
- comply fully with the school's code of conduct
- take the state's kindergarten readiness test at the end of the year

Scholarship students not complying with the attendance or conduct requirement may lose the scholarship.

## **2. Fostering Quality: Requirements for Parents of Scholarship Recipients**

The parents or guardians of Children with Bright Beginnings Scholarships must:

- comply fully with the school's parental involvement requirements, unless excused for illness or good cause.
- ensure that their child takes the assessment specified above.

Parents of scholarship students who do not comply with the parental involvement may lose the scholarship for their student.

## **3. Fostering Quality: Requirements of Providers**

Any provider admitting students with Bright Beginnings Scholarships must:

- Be in compliance with all Florida laws applying to early childhood providers. The laws relating to Florida's K-12 private schools may serve as a guideline if additional requirements are considered. In particular, statutes relating to such things as health, safety, criminal background checks and other protections for the children may be pertinent.
- Be accredited by, or be formally in the process for accreditation by an organization that sets meaningful and demanding standards of quality. The accrediting organizations recognized in Florida's Gold Seal program would seem to be a good basis.
- Maintain a school profile that contains pertinent information regarding the school, its curriculum, staff and the performance of its students. This profile must be readily available to families attending or considering the school. It may be that eligible schools should be required to post this information on the Internet through such a website as GreatSchools.net.
- Have evidence of fiscal soundness as defined in FS 220.187

#### 4. Fostering Quality: Consequences for non-complying providers

- *Any parents dissatisfied with their child's progress may move their child to a different school and the scholarship will follow the child.*
- Failure to have on file, failure to provide, or deliberate misrepresentation of any of the above profile information may result in the following actions by the State:
  - Notification of families at the school with Bright Beginnings scholarships of the element(s) and manner(s) in which the school is not in compliance.
  - Suspension of the eligibility of the school to admit new students with Bright Beginnings Scholarships until the deficiency is rectified.
- Failure to comply with any of the other requirements of section 3 (above) may result in the following actions by the State:
  - Notification of families at the school with Bright Beginnings scholarships of the element(s) and manner(s) in which the school is not in compliance.
  - Suspension of the eligibility of the school to admit new students with Bright Beginnings Scholarships until the deficiency is rectified.

#### 5. Fostering Quality: Measuring student learning on the Kindergarten screening test.

Because all Florida children entering kindergarten will be administered this test, the families will have an ever-growing resource of information on the success of children schooled in different settings, with different philosophies, at different centers, etc. The fundamental measure of whether the program is achieving its purposes is how much the children will have learned. That will be determined by the State's screening test and other recognized assessment instruments.

#### IV. Summation

What Florida needs to do to ensure that all of its 4-year-olds will learn those things that will prepare them to be successful students from then on is:

- Place the funds for each child's instruction in the hands of that child's own parents
- help the parents get the information they need to make informed judgments regarding their choice of **their own child's school and their own child's progress**
- protect the parents from misleading information or fraudulent activities that can frustrate or undermine their role as the child's primary educational guardian.
- establish conditions for keeping the scholarship that will encourage its effective use
- Foster quality provision and deter malpractice